

Clotilde

(c. 474 – 3 June 545)

BRIEFING

Clotilde (c. 474 – 3 June 545 in Burgundy, France) (also known as Clotilda (Fr.), Chlothilde (Ger.) Chlothildis, Chlotichilda, Clodechildis, Croctild, Crote-hild, Hlotild, Rhotild, and many other forms), is a saint and was a Queen of the Franks.

Clotilde is the patron saint of the lame in Normandy and the patron saint of Les Andelys and has been "invoked against sudden death and iniquitous husbands". She married Clovis I, the first king of the Franks, in 492 or 493. Their marriage, from the 6th century on, "was made the theme of epic narratives, in which the original facts were materially altered". Clotilde's story fascinated later generations because it was "the centerpiece of a struggle between the old Catholic, Roman population against the Arianism of the Germanic tribes". She was able to convince Clovis to convert to Christianity; the Franks, due to her influence, were Catholics for centuries. Political and violent intrigue surrounded her family for most of her life. After the death of Clovis, she spent the rest of her life near the tomb of Saint Martin of Tours, "led a devout life", became "totally detached from politics and power-struggles except through prayer", and gave everything she had to the poor.

Clotilde is represented as a praying queen and as a nun. She built churches, monasteries, and convents, including the Basilica of the Holy Apostles, which later became the Church of Sainte-Geneviève, which she and Clovis built as a mausoleum honouring Saint Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris. Clotilde's feast day is June 3.

BIOGRAPHY

Early life

Clotilde, born around 474, was from Burgundy. According to hagiographer Alban Butler, the only source for Clotilde's biography, which was edited by Bruno Krusch before the 10th century, is mostly dependent upon a document written by a monk from Saint-Denis a couple of centuries earlier. Her history has also been pieced together by Gregory of Tours and Fredegarius, and in certain hagiographies. Butler states that the most reliable source about her life is by Belgian historian Godefroid Kurth, but David Hugh Farmer calls Gregory of Tours' hagiography about Clotilde "the principal source for her life" and said that a later hagiography "celebrated her as the saintly ancestor of the French kings". Her history also appears in French hagiographies, but most of them were written before Kurth's.

It seems Clotilde's grandfather was Gondioc, who had four sons, Gundobad, Clotilde's father Chilperic II of Burgundy, Gondemar, and Godegisel. After Gondioc's death, Burgundy was divided up among them, but Gundobad gained power over Burgundy when he murdered his brothers. Gundobad also killed Clotilde's brothers and her mother Caretena, who might have converted her husband to Christianity and was called "a remarkable woman" by Sidonius Apollinaris and Venantius Fortunatus. Clotilde and her sister, Sedeleuba (or Chrona), who became a nun and founded the church of Saint-Victor in Geneva, were raised at the court of Gundobad. They were educated as Catholics, even though Gundobad, like most of the Burgundian kings, were Arians. According to hagiographer Sabine Baring-Gould, Clotilde "grew up full of piety and tenderness to sufferers".

Later life and marriage

Shortly after Caretena's death, Clotilde and Clovis I, the first king of the Franks, were married, in 492 or 493. As Farmer put it, Clovis was "impressed by her beauty and wisdom". Their marriage, from the 6th century on, "was made the theme of epic narratives, in which the original facts were materially altered". Clotilde's story fascinated later generations because it was "the centerpiece of a struggle between the old Catholic, Roman population against the Arianism of the Germanic tribes", although there is no evidence that Clovis was an Arian sympathizer before his marriage and conversion to Catholicism. Clotilde had influence over Clovis and actively encouraged him to convert to Catholicism. He allowed the baptism of their oldest son, Ingomir, who died in infancy, and of their next son, Clodomir, but he blamed their oldest child's death on Clotilde's faith and resisted her attempts to convert him. Clodomir also became ill, but recovered and they had five children in all: four sons, Ingomir; and Clodomir, Childebert, and Clotaire, who all became kings; and one daughter, named Clotilde after her mother. Clotilde's vita describes her daughter's life, who married a Visigothic man named Amalaric, who she unsuccessfully tried to convert to Catholicism and who "cruelly treated". Little is known about her mother during Clovis' lifetime and about their marriage, but she might have been involved with his intervention of the quarrel between the Burgundian kings at the time and Clovis' support of Gundobad. Historian Godefroid Kurth said, about Clotilde, that she was "saddened by cruel trials".

Clovis was baptized by St. Remigius at Reims in 496, along with 3,000 of the Frankish people, after a battle with the Alemanni. His army was losing, but he appealed to his wife's God for help, promising that if he won, he would accept the Christian faith. According to tradition, while Clotilde was in prayer and as Clovis began to win the battle, an angel brought her three white lilies; Clovis later substituted lilies for the three frogs on the insignia on his battle shield. Sabine Baring-Gould considers Clovis' conversion sincere and that it was not due to political considerations. Baring-Gould also did not believe that Clotilde did not influence Clovis to fight this war or others in order to revenge her family's death. Clovis' subsequent military achievements against the Burgundians and Visigoths also do not seem to have been associated with Clotilde. The Franks, due to Clotilde's influence, were Catholics for centuries.

Clovis died in 511; Clotilde buried him at the Basilica of the Holy Apostles, which later became the Church of Sainte-Geneviève, which they built together as a mausoleum honouring Saint Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris. Genevieve might have been the first to suggest that Clovis build a church honouring Saint Peter and Saint Paul, which he built in deference to Clotilde's wishes; she completed the church after his death.

Post-marriage and death

According to Kurth Godefroid in The Catholic Encyclopedia, an epic about the Franks states that Clotilde incited her son Chlodomer to start a war with his cousin, Sigismund of Burgundy, in order to avenge the death of her parents. Godefroid doubts the story is true, considers it a defamation against Clotilde, and states that she arranged a truce between Clovis and Gondebad, Sigismund's father. Butler agrees, stating that sources such as the writings of Gregory of Tours have been disproven, which has "vindicated the queen from charges of ferocity and vindictiveness, little in keeping with her saintly character". According to Butler, Chlodomer captured and killed Sigismund, as well as his wife and children, but Chlodomer was killed by Sigismund's brother. Clotilde adopted her son's three young boys, but was induced to send the children to her other sons, who had the two oldest killed. The youngest boy, Clodoald, was saved and later became a monk in Paris, at the monastery in Nogent-sur-Marne, which was later renamed in his honour. According to Dunbar, the husband of Clotilde's daughter at one point sent a blood-stained veil to her brothers; her brother Chilbert retaliated against him, pillaging his towns, and brought his sister away from her husband, but she died on the way to Paris.

After the death of Clovis and her grandchildren, Clotilde left Paris and moved to Tours, where spent most of her time near the tomb of Saint Martin of Tours and became closely associated with the diocese of Tours; according to Dunbar she and Clovis had a devotion to Saint Martin. As Farmer reports, "Thenceforward she led a devout life". According to Farmer, she became "totally detached from politics and power-struggles except through prayer". Dunbar states that she "prayed and fasted and wept, and gave all she had to the poor".

Farmer states that Clotilde continued to have a political role in "the violent Merovingian world", mostly through her sons. Gregory of Tours wrote that her prayers delayed a war between her two surviving sons; as Butler put it, "The very next day, as the armies were about to engage, there arose a tempest that all military operations had to be abandoned". A month later, Clotilde died in Tours on 3 June 545 and was buried at the feet of St. Genevieve and beside Clovis and her older children, at the Basilica of the Holy Apostles. She was a widow for 34 years. Her daughter died at about the same time.

LEGACY

Clotilde is represented as a praying queen and as a nun, with a crown on her head or beside her. She is patron saint of the lame in Normandy and the patron saint of; according to Farmer, she has been "invoked against sudden death and iniquitous husbands".

She founded the monastery of St. Mary of les Audelya in Touraine and a monastery in Chelles, and built churches, reportedly at Rouen, Lyon, and Les Andelys; The monastery in Chelles was built for nuns, in honour of Saint George; Saint Bathilde of Chelles, the wife of Clovis II, restored it 100 years later. The monastery was wealthy until modern times and was, for many years, "a great place of resort and education for English princesses", who were the descendants of Clovis and Clotilde. In 511, Clotilde founded a convent for young noble girls in Les Andelys, where the collegiate church now stands. According to a story related on the Les Andelys tourist office website, a miracle occurred there during the convent's construction. One day, the workers complained about the heat and their thirst; in response, Clotilde prayed and water from a nearby fountain "had the power and the taste of wine for the workers". The space in front of the fountain was larger than it currently is, so there was enough room for pilgrims who came for healing, which reinforced people's belief in its power. The spring has become known for healing skin diseases.

Clotilde has been depicted in art over several centuries presiding over the baptism of Clovis or as a suppliant at St. Martin's shrine. The church dedicated to her in Andelys contains a "fine 16th-century stained-glass window devoted to her life". There is a painting of Clotilde in the Bedford Missal, probably by Jan Van Eyck, which Dunbar describes as "a beautiful and brilliant representation of the granting of the lilies to Clovis". Her relics survived the French Revolution and as of 1997, are stored at the Church of Saint Louis of France in Paris. In 1857, a "grand new church" was founded in her honour in Paris. Clotilde's feast day is June 3.